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THE LENGTH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR

PRESENTATION
TO THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

BY THE
ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

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ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION
SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
ON THE LENGTH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY AND YEAR

INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), which represents the public school boards of this province providing open access to educational opportunities for all, is pleased to appear before the Legislative Select Committee on Education.

OPSBA recognizes that the current length and organization of the school year and school day no longer need to be based on the traditional needs of an agrarian society. More flexibility may be required to accommodate differing lifestyles and the needs of the individual learner.

Before any changes in the current length and organization of the school day and school year are considered, however, an in-depth analysis of the issues involved and an assessment of the potential impact, both financial and educational, on the current educational system must be undertaken and the community consulted. Changes must not be made for political expediency.

I. LENGTH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

Before discussing the length and organization of the school year, it must be recognized that community use of the public schools of Ontario is a wide-spread activity. School facilities are utilized not only for regular day school but for continuing education evening programs, summer school programs and various community activities throughout the week and on weekends. Recognition of the community use of schools must be taken into account when considering altering the current school year.

Current School Year

Currently, provision is made for 185 instructional days within the school year. The way in which these instructional days are organized varies from board to board. However, a major organizational change has occurred in the past few years with the shift from the traditional year-long program to the semestered system. Even if no further changes are contemplated with regard to the length and organization of the current school year, this shift to the semester system necessitates a number of changes in the regulations.

i) Lack of Congruence with College/University Admission

Given the OS:IS requirements regarding instructional time and the fact that, under the current semester system the semester cannot start until after Labour Day, the first semester does not end until the end of January with an extended break at Christmas. The second semester starts in February and runs until the end of June.

As a result of these timelines, there is an increasing problem for students graduating from the semester system with regard to admission to post-secondary education. While an increasing number of students are completing secondary school after the first semester, very few universities offer a February admission to the general arts program and there is no access to the specialized programs at the February entry point.

ii) Teacher Contracts

An additional problem that has been highlighted by the switch to the semester system concerns teacher contracts.

Regulation 277 (Teacher Contracts) under the Education Act prescribes the dates and deadlines regarding termination of contracts. A contract can be terminated:

6(a) at any time by mutual consent in writing by the teacher and the board; or

(b) on the 31st day of December in any year of the teacher's employment by either party giving written notice to the other on or before the last preceding 30th day of November; or

(c) on the 31st day of August in any year of the teacher's employment by either party giving written notice to the other on or before the last preceding 31st day of May.

A major problem has arisen for school boards with a semester system because Section 6(b) of the regulation does not correspond with the end of the first semester. Either an amendment has to be made to the regulation to accommodate the semester system or the school year has to be reorganized to ensure that semesters end in December rather than the end of January.

Revisions to Current School Year

Before any changes are made to the current school year either in its length or organization, the educational and financial implications of such changes must be carefully examined.

There have been a number of arguments that the current school year should be lengthened. In many cases, the arguments are based on the assumption that the current school year has an inadequate number of instructional days to provide the quality of education that is required in today's society.

Instead of increasing the amount of instructional time by lengthening the school year, OPSBA would argue what is needed is more flexibility for school boards to organize the current available time.

There are a number of possibilities which can be considered when examining the organization of the school year, including the division of the current school year into two equal semesters, the trimester system, and the year-round school.

i) Two Semesters

The school year could be divided into two equal semesters before and after the December break. The first semester could run from August to December and the second from mid-January to mid-June. This proposal would provide for two smooth running uninterrupted terms and would focus on Christmas as the middle of the year. The secondary school term would fall in line with colleges and universities and would provide for those students fast-tracking to attend a college or university of their choice at the commencement of a second term, which is not now the case. In addition, high school students would finish their year earlier and would be in a better position to obtain summer jobs.

This schedule could apply to the elementary as well as the secondary schools.

ii) Trimesters

Consideration could be given to the feasibility of dividing the school year into three equal parts. This would allow for holiday breaks between trimesters, provide a greater number of entrance points for students, and maximize the use of existing facilities.

iii) Year-Round School

Operating schools on a year-round basis has been a favoured alternative in a number of American states. There are certain advantages to operating schools on a year-round basis:

- It alleviates overcrowding and reduces capital expenditure for new pupil places.

- Educational benefits include a more continuous flow of instruction throughout the year. The education of students is enhanced when there are shorter periods away from studies.

- Parents, in many cases, are the principal beneficiaries of a reformed school year calendar because the long summer vacation of the current system creates major problems for child-care arrangements.

However, there are also a number of disadvantages to year-round education which must be addressed. For example:

- There is the assumption that there will be a saving of capital costs with the year-round use of schools. There may be a short term advantage but these savings must be weighed against the increased maintenance and upgrading costs associated with the year-round use of the facilities. Increased utilization of present facilities would add to the wear and tear of both plant and equipment with a corresponding increase in cost. Yet, there are virtually no funds available for the maintenance of present facilities.

- There are increased teacher and administrative costs.

- There will be less time for renovations and major repairs which usually occur during the down time of the school year.

School Year Recommendations

Rather than proposing major changes to the length of the school year, what is required is the flexibility for school boards to organize the current time available for instructional purposes, within some generally agreed-upon guidelines.

For example, the opportunity to operate one or two year-round schools would give both students and staff multiple entry points. Further, in jurisdictions where capacities are underutilized, full year usage may well be a more effective use of buildings.

OPSBA therefore recommends that:

The Ministry of Education change the regulations to allow for more flexibility in organizing the current instructional school year. School boards should be given more automomy to set the school calendar so that differences in locale and community aspirations can be addressed;

Pilot projects be undertaken to assess the impact of differing school year organizational strategies and that the results be shared among school boards.

In order to alleviate the short term problems with the current school year organization based on the semester system, it is further recommended that:

The Ministry of Education study the possibility of congruence between university/college and school calendars;

The regulations provide timelines for the termination of teacher contracts which accomodate the current semester system.

In order to improve deployment of current staff resources and provide more flexibility for school boards, and in light of the current teacher shortage, one option that deserves more careful consideration is the current teacher work schedule. For example, teachers could be employed on a twelve month basis with Christmas, March break, and one month vacation. The additional one month could be used for professional up-grading or summer school teaching at the discretion of the board. Therefore, summer programs could be provided at no extra cost to the board and the board could use the freed-up finances for regional professional development programs for teachers.

II. LENGTH AND ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY

The length of the current school day is mandated by the regulations and provides very little flexibility for school boards. The regulations state that the school day shall consist of no less than five hours and shall not begin earlier than 8 a.m. and end later than 5 p.m., except with the approval of the Minister.

There is also no flexibility for school boards to schedule the lunch periods as the result of a unilateral change in the regulations in June 1988.

Without prior consultation with school boards, a change was made in Regulation 262 concerning the lunch hour of teachers. Instead of the previous regulation stating that "the lunch break for pupils and teachers shall not be less than forty minutes" the regulation was changed to state "a scheduled interval between classes for the lunch break for pupils and teachers shall not be less than forty consecutive minutes".

This unilateral change has had major implications for school boards by removing an item that had been on the bargaining table in many areas and influencing a number of school programs including lunch room and yard supervision during the lunch break. Extra-curricular programs were also affected, particularly in rural areas where these programs occurred during the lunch period as opposed to after school due to busing arrangements.

There are very few reasons to extend the current school day and such an extension would be deleterious to a number of programs and activities.

While the school day extension would favour working parents by having the school provide greater custodial services for their children, it would also however, reduce the time available for extra-curricular activities and job

opportunities of secondary school students. The present school day facilitates the effective combination of study and part-time employment for many of our secondary school students. Lengthening the school day will cause problems with this study-work combination.

A longer school day may have a negative effect on younger children and it is questionable whether more time spent in school would result in any significant educational benefits.

A longer school day would have an effect on busing. In many areas, students are expected to be on the bus from as early as 7:30 a.m. to as late as 4:45 p.m. It would be unreasonable to expect students to be away from home for longer periods than is already necessary.

The community use of school facilities would be affected. At present, a number of community organizations and provincial and local government agencies offer services outside of regular school hours to youth and adults. Lengthening the school day may well be detrimental to their operation because it would put us in competition for the same facilities and clients.

The solution to "crowded curriculum" is not an extended school day, but better utilization of the current instructional time through better teaching, more uninterrupted teaching, and a more integrated curriculum. The hours spent taking a course should not be the only criterion for getting a credit. One possible way of ensuring less interupted instructional time with the same teacher would be to extend the current school day to accomodate forty minutes of preparation time for teachers before or after the instructional day.

School boards require more flexibility to work within the current instructional hours. Precise definitions regarding opening and closing times are best dealt with at the local school board level to accommodate the needs of the particular community and the characteristics of the students.

In addition to the question of extending the school day, there is the issue of defining the school day and the possible inclusion of continuing education programs.

OPSBA does not support the extension of the school day to include continuing education programs. Such a change would increase the cost of providing these programs, and school boards would be unable to afford them. Currently, contining education teachers are employed on a third form of contract and, in most instances, are not compensated at the same rate as day school teachers.

If the school day is lengthened to include continuing education programs, and teachers are employed on a full time basis and assigned to teach at any time during the extended school day, then a corresponding change in the grant regulations should occur so that a "student is a student" for grant purposes regardless of when a course is taken.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Before any changes are made to either the length or organization of the current school year and school day, a careful examination must be undertaken of both the educational and financial implications of such changes.

OPSBA believes that what is needed is more quality use of the current time, not more time. Rather than proposing major changes to the current length of the school year and school day, an alternative would be more flexibility for school boards to organize the current time available within some generally agreed-upon guidelines.

Central to the issue of quality time for both the school day and the school year is the question of teacher training and education. The Select Committee needs to examine the whole teacher training process, teacher in-service, teacher upgrading and evaluation.

The current teacher training system needs to be reviewed. The selection process appears to favour undergraduate marks as the major criterion for admission to teacher training facilities. This assumes that academic background is the major characteristic of a successful teacher and that all other skills and characteristics can be taught in a one-year program.

School administrators need to be held responsible for the quality of education that occurs in their schools, but they are restricted without an effective teacher evaluation process. OPSBA therefore recommends that:

> **The Ministry of Education examine the establishment of an effective teacher evaluation system.**

Any teacher evaluation program will not be effective, however, if school boards have no power to deal with teachers who are not performing up to professional standards. It is therefore recommended that:

> **The mandate of the newly-established Ontario Council on Teacher Education be expanded to deal with issues of certification and de-certification.**

IV. SUMMARY

OPSBA makes the following recommendations and suggestions for further study concerning the length and organization of the school year and school day to the Legislative Select Committee on Education:

Recommendations

1. That the Ministry of Education change the regulations to allow more flexibility for school boards organizing the current instructional school year so that differences in locale and community aspirations can be addressed;

2. That pilot projects be undertaken to assess the impact of differing school year organizational strategies and that the results be shared among school boards;

3. That the Ministry of Education study the possibility of congruence between university, college, and school calendars;

4. That the regulations provide timelines for the termination of teacher contracts which accommodate the current semester system;

5 That the regulation regarding the provision of an uninterrupted lunch hour for teachers be revoked;

6. That there be more flexibility regarding school opening and closing times;

7. That the current school day not be extended to include continuing education programs;

8. That the Ministry of Education examine the establishment of an effective teacher evaluation system;

9. That the mandate of the newly-established Ontario Council on Teacher Education be expanded to deal with issues of certification and de-certification.

Suggestions for Further Study

1. That alternatives to the current teacher work schedule be examined including the possibility that teachers be employed on a twelve month basis with Christmas, March break, and one month vacation. The additional one month could be used for professional up-grading or summer school teaching at the discretion of the board.

2. That the possibility of lengthening the current school day to accommodate forty minutes of preparation time for teachers before or after the instructional day be examined.